

Awakening Inner Strength

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The hidden strength

What is the history of the world? Swami Vivekananda asked this question and himself provided the answer: it was the life story of a few people who believed in themselves. This belief, when it is taken to its highest level, is called *shraddhā*. It is the lack of *shraddhā* that has brought about the present degradation in our society.

We are aware that India is endowed with many positive gifts. Our youth population is one. But are we really harnessing this youth strength? What is the larger picture we see in our country today? We find that many new initiatives are being taken, lots of developments are also taking place and lots of foreign money has been flowing in for investments. As a result, people are becoming richer no doubt, but at the same time, a large number of people are living below the poverty line. Millions and millions are languishing for want of basic necessities like food, shelter and so on. Now, if we really utilize our youth strength, our country can go much ahead and we can do enormously good work to take the whole country forward and restore her to her former glory. Swamiji says in ‘My Plan of Campaign’:

This national ship, my countrymen, my friends, my children—this national ship has been ferrying millions and millions of souls across the waters of life....But today,

perhaps through your own fault, this boat has become a little damaged, has sprung a leak; and would you therefore curse it?...If there are holes in this national ship, this society of ours, we are its children. Let us go and stop the holes. Let us gladly do it with our hearts’ blood... (*Complete Works*, Vol. 3, p. 227)

That is our commitment to our nation. Swamiji greatly believed in the youths of our country. Therefore most of his addresses from 1897 till he laid down his body in 1902, were meant for them. Swamiji has clearly explained how they could be great instruments for restoring India to her former glory. I think all of us should try to find out where exactly we are today. Can we do something? What we are mainly concerned with in our present discussion is the idea of awakening the inner strength.

We all know what strength is. It is often understood as the exhibition of physical prowess. But what exactly is ‘inner strength’? The great philosopher William James in his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, discusses a beautiful phenomenon. Suppose you are climbing a very steep mountain. It is a very tough climb. But you go on and on. At one stage, you find that you cannot take one step further. You are so tired, so exhausted that you feel like giving up the attempt. But, James says, if you can manage to take one step forward, from that moment you will experience the release of a new energy, a

new enthusiasm, a new capacity within yourself. This enables you to continue your trek further. This is one aspect of the inner strength that is hidden in all of us.

I do not know how many of you have heard the name of the great mountaineer Arunima Sinha. A national level volleyball player, she was once travelling by a train, when she was attacked by some miscreants, who threw her out of the train compartment. As ill luck would have it, another train came at that very moment and ran over one of her legs. She lay in that condition unconscious for the whole night. Next morning she was detected in that condition and taken to a nearby hospital. Doctors there said that her leg had to be amputated just below the knee. Presuming that she was unconscious, the doctors were discussing among themselves whether they should go for it, given the fact that there were no facilities for anesthesia. But Arunima was conscious and she said, 'Please do it'. Imagine how painful the surgery could be! But she withstood all that, because she was a believer in Swami Vivekananda and his message of strength. Subsequently, may be after a year or so, she went on to climb Mt. Everest—the first woman amputee to do so. Later, bolstered by her success, she has conquered several other peaks of the world. How was it possible? Even normal, able-bodied people fail to perform this feat. But how could she do it? Where did that extraordinary courage and strength come from? It came from within her. But this does not happen only in such cases where so much positive action is involved. We might see this display of courage and strength in terrorist activities as well. In such heinous activities we also see a small indication of something, some expression of inexorable strength coming

from deep within, unfortunately though for a totally wrong cause.

Some other examples

Dhirubhai Ambani worked in a cycle repairing shop. But he went on to establish one of the biggest industrial empires in India, namely the Reliance Group. Dr Abdul Kalam, the former President of India, came from a fishermen's family. In spite of being born in such a poor family, he dreamt big. He really accessed the tremendous inner strength that was within him and ultimately scaled extraordinary heights. There are many great scientists in our country, yet he carved a niche for himself because he had something else which was not seen in others.

Take the case of Steve Jobs. What was he? He was a college drop-out. He could not complete his graduation; yet he went on to revolutionize the computer industry, the world of mobile phones. Thus, across the globe, wherever someone has achieved something very extraordinary, you will invariably find in him or her certain characteristics, certain special marks, abilities and attitudes that set them apart from others.

I often hear that many of our students who go abroad feel shy to say that they are from India. But if they know a little bit of our tradition and culture, a little bit of our scriptures or have acquaintance with a few texts like the *Bhagavad-Gitā*, probably they would be much better off in those countries. Indeed if you look at the *Bhagavad-Gitā*, what do you find there? There Arjuna, the leader of the Pāndava army, so strong and capable, suddenly, at the beginning of the war, when the troops of both sides are all set for the battle, declares his inability to fight and goes on arguing philosophically:

Why should I fight against ācāryas, elders and others? The question is, how he, who had defeated the stalwarts of the Kaurava army during the ‘Virāta Parva’ all alone, could suddenly behave like that? When Arjuna, thus feels completely directionless, Sri Krishna tells him,

*Kutastvā kashmalamidam vishame
samupasthitam /
Anārya-jushtamasvargyam akirtikaram
Arjuna // 2.2*

—‘My dear Arjuna, how has this delusion overcome you in this hour of peril? It is not befitting an honourable person. It leads not to heaven but to disgrace.’ Then He says,

*Klaibyam māsmā gamah Pārtha naitat
tvayy upapadyate /
Kshudram hridaya-daurbalyam
tyaktv’ottishtha parantapa // 2.3*

—‘O Pārtha, it does not befit you to yield to this unmanliness. O vanquisher of enemies, give up such petty weakness of the heart and arise.’

Swami Vivekananda says, this is the most important verse of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* where Sri Krishna gives such a strong message of strength to Arjuna. What did Arjuna lack? Had he forgotten the ways to handle the bows and arrows? No, he had forgotten his inner strength and capability. The *Bhagavad-Gītā* is so famous and read all over the world because of this particular message of strength and boldness. But we Indians are very reluctant to have a glance at it!

We must know the essential factors of success; why some people excel in certain activities or in different fields of life. You may have heard of Nachiketā of the *Katha Upanishad*. What did the young boy do?

His father conducted a huge *yajna* (sacrifice) and gave away as gifts to Brahmins old, barren cows who would not yield any milk. All his gifts were of such poor qualities! Nachiketā saw all his doings and became anxious and wondered why his father was doing that. He thought his father should give the best of gifts to the Brahmins and others. Then he went to his father and asked: To whom are you going to give me? The father at first did not answer him. But when Nachiketā repeated his question thrice, his father became vexed and angrily answered: ‘To Yama I give you!’ Immediately, the boy prepared to leave for Yama’s abode, because his father’s words were so important to him. The father understood his mistake and pleaded with Nachiketā not to go, but for the boy the words of his father were most important. So he went to Yama and conquered him, so to speak, in that he got from him so many boons including the secret of life and death. Swamiji says this *Katha Upanishad* is really the key to muster strength of character and *shraddhā* or self-confidence. If our youngsters read this Upanishad, they could at least get some idea of the tremendous character-strength that it speaks about. If they do, we would see a much different India in future.

Now let us see what separates ordinary people from the personalities like Abdul Kalam, Steve Jobs and the like and, conversely, what distinguishes them from the commonplace people. There are so many talented kids in India, so many kids play cricket. But how many of them become a Tendulkar? How could Tendulkar reach such a pinnacle? What is the secret? Tendulkar’s own friend and classmate Vinod Kamblī started with a bang like him—

striking two double centuries in two test matches, but suddenly he fell by the roadside. All this leads to the question: what is it that separates ordinary people from the people we see succeeding so wonderfully in their chosen fields of activity? Is it that others do not have abilities? Is it that some alone are gifted with extraordinary abilities?

Distinctive qualities

In Delhi many students after postgraduation or after completing their course in engineering at IITs, enrol themselves in different coaching centres with an aspiration to join the administrative services. They also come to our ashrama. We find that if they do not succeed in the examination in their first or second attempt they become very much depressed and ask us: What shall we do Swamiji? We have not been successful. What will happen to us?

I ask them: Is the post of an IAS officer your final goal? Think about whether there have been in the meanwhile any other value additions to your life. First of all, you have developed the capacity to study hard continuously with a focus and purpose for so many hours together, an ability which you did not possess earlier. Secondly, you have taken a new subject and gained a degree of mastery over it. Now you have got the ability to focus on a particular subject and stay focused without distractions. All these are value additions. You have gone through many struggles and problems and all these have made you stronger than before. Why do you think that Civil Service is the only option open to you? With all these qualities if you try elsewhere you will definitely succeed. You must think what other options are there. Suppose you want to go for Civil Service; if you succeed, well and good. But if you do not, think about your Plan B. Think what else

you can do. To know that is important. Equally important is to raise ourselves to a mental level, where it is possible to believe that we are not ordinary, we can definitely do something extraordinary and this confidence would come from that great idea called *shraddhā*. Swami Vivekananda also calls that *ātmashraddhā*. This Sanskrit word *shraddhā* is poorly translated as faith in English. But it is certainly not faith; it is something far deeper than that. It wells up from the deeper layers of our very own personality—where there is a firm conviction in our own abilities, in our inner strength, a deep, unwavering conviction that we are bound to achieve much higher goals. Thus we can keep on changing our goalpost keeping it always ahead till we reach an extraordinary level. This kind of aspiration and goal-oriented approach in life comes from an intense *ātmashraddhā* or the inner belief that within me lie all the extraordinary powers. That is why Swami Vivekananda talks about education.

Character-building

Swamiji often said, we want character-building and man-making education with *shraddhā* as the guiding motto. You may have heard these two words—‘man-making’ and ‘character-building’ from so many people from so many platforms. But what is the meaning of these two words? Man-making refers to that extraordinary ability or talent that is already within you and manifests itself through your actions. What is character-building? The essential qualities such as dedication, the focus, the ability to work hard etc. constitute the other component, namely character-building. All this would go in the right direction only if *shraddhā* is there as the guiding factor. When you have the deep inner belief that you are bound to do something

great and not live an ordinary life, then only you can develop yourself along the lines of man-making and character-building. These do not just come from ordinary academic education. We need some deeper inputs, deeper ideas, deeper understanding of education itself.

The question is: Is it possible for all of us to aspire for something great? The answer is, yes. Not only that, there are so many other ideas. For instance, what is the goal of our life? How are we going to achieve it? What is that which gives us completeness, happiness and a sense of fulfilment? All these need to be understood. For this understanding a certain amount of clarity of thought is needed. Ultimately, what is 'success' in life? Does it mean just earning a huge amount of salary or business income? Apparently, yes, for we all need money; we all need comforts of life. Suppose, you have a great income, say, ten lakhs a month! But then, many other difficulties come in its train, such as anxieties, worries, stress, etc. Compared to that, one who is earning much less is found to be far more happy, because he is stable, contented, not worried. He is not threatened, he does not have the kind of stress you undergo. What would you, then, call success? Who is really successful, you or the second person? So we also need to understand what we really want and what would give us that kind of fullness we are talking about.

Swami Vivekananda used to tell a very beautiful story. There was a lioness who was getting old. She could not hunt as before. Above all she was pregnant. So she used to look for easy prey. One day, when she saw a flock of sheep, she chased them and finally jumped to catch a young one. The effort was too much for her. She fell

down, gave birth to a lion cub, and died in the process. This cub had lost its mother at birth. So it did not know who its mother was. The flock of sheep adopted it. They used to feed the lion cub with sheep's milk and grass. Thus it became a complete vegetarian. In course of time it grew up to become a huge lion cub.

One day another lion came there in search of prey and was shocked to see a grown-up lion cub in the flock of sheep. So he caught hold of the cub and took it aside to ask what it was doing among the flock of sheep. The lion cub started bleating and trembling in fear. It replied: I am not a lion, I am a sheep. My mother gives me milk and nice grass. Hearing this ridiculous answer the big lion took him to a nearby tank and made him see his reflection in the water: 'What do you see in the water?' 'Two images', the grass-eating lion replied. 'Who is the bigger one?' asked the senior lion. 'Sir, it looks like you.' 'Who is the smaller one?' 'Sir, it looks like me.' The big lion then gave him a big slap and forcibly thrust a piece of flesh into his mouth. Though hesitating at first, he slowly got the great taste of the flesh. The big lion then said: 'Roar like me.' After a few unsuccessful attempts, it finally roared, and then both of them vanished into the deep forest.

There is a great lesson to be learnt from the simple story. Swamiji said, most of us are like that lion cub. We are endowed with tremendous power and extraordinary qualities. We are that infinite, birthless, eternal Ātman, full of bliss, without any bondage and limitations. Yet, we constantly think that we can't do this, we can't do that. How could Arunima Sinha with one leg climb Mt. Everest? Because somewhere she had read Swamiji's message, that within everyone dwells that extraordinary power.

Swamiji talks about education and says that it should make you conscious of the infinite possibilities and infinite capacities hidden in you all. He defines education as perfection. In other words, manifestation of perfection is education. It is not simply information you gather from books and what the teachers tell you, but your ability to recognize within yourself that extraordinary power or perfection. That is what Swamiji has wanted.

So many of you have enrolled in MBA courses. But how many of you are going to get lucrative jobs? Are you then going to be frustrated and give up all efforts? No, there is a Plan B, a Plan C and so forth. You should think—‘Yes, I took this course, but I can do much more than that. I can be an entrepreneur myself or I can do something else.’ But at the end of the day you must feel satisfied, happy and peaceful. It does not matter what you do. What is more important is how you do it. So these kinds of positive and constructive ideas are again and again stressed by Swamiji in his discourses on education.

The role model

Now these ideas are all very well, but where is the role model for you to emulate? Who is going to show the way? You know, the traditional Indian education was based on the *gurukula* system. It meant living in close company of the gurus who were extraordinary people. That is why our students in those days could become really so great. They could constantly receive the guidance, inspiration and encouragement of such teachers. Even today, many people who are in great positions refer to their teachers who inspired them. The teachers might not have been highly qualified in academic sense, but they could instil in the

students’ heart an idea that they can do something great. So, unless we are able to be in the company of such persons, it is very difficult to be inspired. The only other way is to find a role model for yourself, who can be a constant source of inspiration. Can you think of someone who can be a role model for a vast majority of people, particularly for the youth? Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam can be a role model for those who want to be a space scientist or an engineer, or an entrepreneur. But if you have a universal role model you can reap much higher benefits. In that context, I would like you to examine whether Swami Vivekananda can be a role model for all of you. What is the benefit of having such a role model? The answer is, this is the easiest and the most wonderful way of awakening your inner power. If you read Swamiji’s life, or even if you look at his photograph kept on your table just for five or ten minutes, thinking about his life, his extraordinary power of concentration, ability and strength, you will be able to catch his fire. Just imagine that wherever he went, he won. In 1893 he went to America. He was there as a monk in his strange dress, with no money, no winter clothes—nothing! Yet he could survive. Not only that, he went on to conquer the whole world. Today he is one of the most talked about figures. About 125 years ago he was able to make a tremendous impact in America. How was it possible? It was possible because he was a person of strength, character, intellect and the ability to work hard; above all, he had adamant faith in himself. Similarly, you will be inspired if you have him as your role model. The ability to awaken the inner strength and inner power in you requires that kind of an ideal. When you adopt other role models you may become unidimensional. But if you

choose Vivekananda, you can go in any direction you like and yet succeed because here is a person who is capable of inspiring you in every possible way. Swami Ranganathanandaji used to say that Vivekananda's words can revolutionize you.

Incidentally, this idea of awakening inner strength does not have much to do with formal learning. Of course, in educational institutions you have access to so many stimulating ideas. But I can tell you that even without much formal learning people can have a taste of success and fulfilment in a great way. I want to share with you an example from our own monastic organization. There was a swami named Muktananda in our Benaras sevashrama. He came there more than fifty years ago. He did not have much academic qualification. He probably had cleared the school final. He was inspired by the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. His guru asked him to go to Benaras to serve the patients there and assured him that this would give him everything in life. Even now it is a very ordinary poor men's hospital. They gave him a small table in the outpatient department and some ordinary dressing material and said: your job is to dress the wounds of the patients. At first, he did not know how to dress the wounds properly, but slowly he learnt. He remembered the words of his guru and felt that this was what would give him the real *summum bonum* of his life, the supreme peace, happiness and satisfaction. With that firm conviction he started.

By eight o'clock he would come to the OPD, and almost till three o'clock he would go on dressing all the patients. For this job

he would have to stand for prolonged hours. After that he would slowly go to the monastery. After forty years or so, because of standing all day like that, he developed severe rheumatism. His knees were all swollen. He could not walk much. But he refused to stay away from the OPD and continued to do his work as before. People would come from far-off places just to get his healing touch. For them, he was the moving Vishvanath. After 50 years he could not walk at all. But he still insisted on going to the OPD. They would take him on a wheel chair. After a year or so when he could not stand at all, the Ashrama authorities forced him to retire. That was the time when I met him and it was such an extraordinary experience. He was not a successful person in the worldly sense, but here was a person who had taken up some ordinary work of service and converted it into an extraordinary experience so that he became a great role model, not only for the monks but also for others.

Rich people are remembered for a very short time. But look at Swamiji, he was a monk. He passed away more than a century ago, yet even now we remember him with so much respect, awe, extraordinary adoration. Why? Because, he lived for others. When you go to Swami Vivekananda you will not only feel inspired to exert yourself to access your inner strength and excel, but he will also give you the mantra that the real success in life lies in living or at least doing something for others, incorporating in it the twin ideals of sacrifice and service. Then only your life would become whole or complete and each can achieve greatness in his or her own way. ■

* This article is based on a lecture the swami delivered at the Ramakrishna Math, Mangalore, on 8 September, 2017. Swami Shantatmananda is currently Secretary, Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda Institute of Values, Gurgaon.